



## Information Space for Nigerian Rural Dwellers: Roles of Public Libraries

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### Abstract

*This paper examines the information needs of rural dwellers in Nigeria and the roles played by public libraries to make sure that these needs are met using the instrumentality of information and communications technology. Rural dwellers in Nigeria are predominantly farmers. Nigeria cannot afford the neglect of her rural communities if United Nations 2030 agenda for sustainable developments are to be met. Literature on information needs of rural dwellers and their use of information technology were reviewed. Literature was also reviewed on the roles of libraries in meeting the information needs of rural dwellers. A model was developed on how public libraries can collaborate with other stakeholders to provide an information space that will meet the information needs of rural dwellers. The model took cognisance of use of mobile devices by the rural dwellers. Recommendations are made on how the implementation of the model can be sustained.*

**Keywords:** Public Libraries, Information Space, Rural Dwellers, Public libraries in Nigeria

### Introduction

Information is today seen as a resource that contributes immensely to economic growth and job creation in any society, hence the term information age. The information age is an age where your competitive advantage as an individual, an organization or a country is not dependent on your physical ability or your intelligence but on your access to the right

information. Information is today seen as one of the major factors of production. Access to the right information by rural dwellers in Nigeria is very important if Nigeria is to take advantage of sustainable developmental goals of United Nations. Key elements of the goals include: provision of food and eradication of poverty, highlighted as goals number one and two among other sustainable development goals (IFLA,2014).

Information is the main ingredient in the acquisition of knowledge. Knowledgeable members of a community are expected to be the fulcrum on which the development of that community is built. Therefore, a society that intends to develop must see information as a tool for development (Kamba, 2009). In Nigeria, information needs of rural dwellers are in the areas of agriculture, health, education, transportation, religion, housing, and job. Although rural dwellers in Nigeria need information in these areas to be better members of their communities, they need more adequate and timely information on agriculture because they are predominantly farmers.

Nigerian economy was thriving on agricultural products produced by rural dwellers prior to the discovery of crude oil in 1956 (Okotie, 2018). After the discovery of crude oil in Nigeria, less attention was paid by successive Nigerian governments to agriculture. However, agriculture is still the major employer of labour (Ekerete & Ekanem, 2015). The dwindling price of crude oil in the international market due to a number of factors that include: many countries shifting attention to renewable energy, has compelled Nigerian government to be seriously focusing on agriculture. Farmers who engage in agriculture are predominantly rural dwellers.

The rural populace in Nigeria suffers from an acute low productivity, social and economic retrogression due mainly to ignorance, which is also a direct consequence of inadequate information provision to them. Hence, their social exclusion from active

participation in national developmental efforts. Considering their numerical strength in relation to the potentiality of what positively significant contributions they stand to make in the society generally, their exclusion from the main-stream of events could, at best, be described as a cog in the wheel of the nation's progress. Rural information provision by public and academic libraries is far from adequate in Nigeria. It has been observed, and correctly too, that the specific area of information provision to rural dwellers has suffered greatly and perennially from near-complete neglect. Thus, the rural populace, in contrast to its urban counterpart, is information starved.

An information space where rural dwellers can have access to timely, accurate and useful information is desirable. This will enable them to be more productive not only in subsistence agriculture but also at commercial level. Social research has shown that adoption of Technology (Information and Communications Technology) could be a major fuel for sustainable economic development and job creation (Olaniyi, Adetumbi, & Adereti, 2013). Rural dwellers need information on preservation of food, marketing of products, modern method of crop production and healthy living. They also need political and social information. Before the advent of information and communications technology (ICT), there have been electronic media such as radio and television through which rural dwellers have access to public information. The available sources of information are inadequate to meet the information needs of the rural dwellers for them to be player within the global community. The prevalence of Internet and mobile technology should be an impetus for provision of timely, relevant and adequate information to rural dwellers.

Nigerian public libraries, in partnership with other stakeholders such as agricultural extension workers, are expected to take advantage of the prevalence of Internet and mobile technology to package needed information for wealth and job creation to the rural dwellers. This can be achieved through advocacy and proposals to governmental and non-

governmental agencies for the establishment of multimedia information centres in rural communities across Nigeria

There have been various studies on improving the living standards of rural dwellers in Nigeria, most of these studies have focused on provisions of infrastructures such as good roads and electricity. However, there seems to be no study on how rural dwellers can be assisted to take advantage of Technology (Information and Communication Technology) (ICT) in getting out of poverty. This paper highlighted United Nations Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Developments and the declaration of International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) on how libraries can contribute to achieving the developmental goals. This paper discusses roles of public libraries in meeting information needs of rural dwellers such that they (rural dwellers) can contribute more to Nigeria's economic development in this era of mobile information services.

The major search engines used for qualitative literature review are Google and Yahoo. Academic databases such as Google Scholar, Ebsco Host, Sage and Jstor were searched for relevant scholarly articles. Search terms used include: Information centres in rural communities, information needs of rural dwellers, ICT use by rural dwellers in Nigeria, public libraries services to rural communities in Nigeria and roles of public libraries in information service provision to rural communities.

### **Library and United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**

The United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development identified eradication of extreme poverty among other things as the greatest challenge facing the world we live today. There are seventeen areas outlined that require the collaboration of all countries and stakeholders for the UN agenda to be actualised. The seventeen areas are: 1.No

Poverty 2.No Hunger 3.Good Health 4. Quality Education 5. Gender Equality 6. Clean Water and Sanitation 7.Clean Energy 8.Good Job and Economic Growth 9.Innovation and Infrastructure 10.Reduced Inequality 11.Sustainable Cities and Communities 12 Responsible Consumption 13.Protect the Planet 14.Life Below Water 15.Life on Land 16.Peace and Justice 17.Partnership for the Goals. It is a universal truism that no developmental effort can be successful without making the education of the citizens of a country a priority. According to World Bank (2022), “education is a powerful driver of development and one of the strongest instruments for reducing poverty and improving health, gender equality, peace, and stability”. Therefore, the other sixteen areas of UN developmental goals could not be actualised if attention is not paid to quality education.

In accordance with United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, International Federation of Library Association and Institutions (IFLA) identified the pivotal roles of libraries in the realisation of the sustainable development goals. It is universally accepted that we are in Information age. An age where increased access to information and knowledge is the key ingredient for sustainable development (IFLA, 2014). The first three points of the agenda are closely tied together and have direct impact on the poor and the vulnerable, majority of who dwell in the rural areas. Access to the right knowledge by rural dwellers and capacity to correctly apply it will create good job and contribute to economic growth of individual and developing nations. A critical challenge to the actualization of the UN sustainable development goals is the concern that globalization is leaving behind the vulnerable and the poorest communities (Ki-moon, 2008). IFLA is mandating librarians across countries of the world to engage government of nations on the need to reduce poverty and increase economic and social security in developing countries through globalization.

## **Information Needs of Rural Dwellers and Economic Development**

Nigeria is made up of about 206million people (World Bank, 2020) distributed across six geopolitical zones with different ethnic groups. According to World Bank, about 99million of people in Nigeria reside in the rural areas. History has shown that rural communities' in Nigeria have suffered from enjoying any meaningful development largely because of policy implementation gap artificially created by the Nigerian governments and leaders. The consequence of these neglect resulted in rural communities lacking access to basic needs such as water, food, education, health care, sanitation, information and security, leading to low economic condition and lack of job satisfaction of the rural dwellers.

Due to the predominate oral traditional communication method, most of the rural dwellers source their information through indigenous means such as town criers, churches/mosques and non-conventional sources like friends and close associates, as well as organized groups like agricultural extension workers, political groups and co-operative societies, (Ogunrombi & Amadasu,2005). Electronic media like radio and in few community's television, serve as sources of public information for educational, social, health and political needs. According to (Islam & Ahmed, 2012) there is inequality in access to information by urban and rural dwellers. Urban dwellers have many sources from which they can have access to information compared to rural dwellers who do not have many choices to make.

The information needs of rural dwellers which is based on their activities include those which help them attend to health, agriculture, social, political, trading (petty trading), food processing, textile, pottery and other crafts, entertainment, as well as other public affairs, aesthetic and cultural matters (Abolaji, 2009). According to Ndinde (2014) Community based information centres (CBIC) consists of information infrastructures for the survival and growth of the community, these infrastructures helps in provision of information

required by members of the community to make effective use of the available resources around them and these members usually have some mutual obligations.

### **Public libraries Services, Information Communication Infrastructure and Rural Communities**

The library can have an important role in the advancement of knowledge. This role can be effectively carried out with well-structured and well-planned library services. Library services, including the packaging and repackaging of information, have been provided in Nigeria for many decades (Iwhiwhu, 2008). Unfortunately, a number of problems inhibit the provision of efficient library services in rural areas of the Nigeria and other parts of the continent of Africa. These include lack of physical infrastructure, lack of information and communication technologies (ICT), illiteracy, language barriers, poverty, etc. In tandem with developments in mainstream information provision services in Nigeria, there has been a shift towards more dynamic centres that are concerned with the collection and provision of information in rural communities, rather than simply with the management of collections of books. These community-based information centres began to emerge in the early 1970s and a number are still providing valuable services today.

The low cost of communications and accessibility of the internet means that it is as easy for an individual to reach one person as it is to reach several millions of people. This offers great possibilities for creating new jobs in the emerging information-based economy particularly for the rural communities. It also offers the possibility to manage the existing job market in rural areas more efficiently. For the most part, all that it takes is the ability to acquire and transmit information.

According to Nzeako (1999) the effect of internet and mobile technology can be put to positive use in rural communities in the area of agriculture to bring about the following:

access to new techniques for improving agricultural production; efficient marketing of agricultural products through information and telecommunications network; more efficient distribution; monitoring market performance and measuring market trends and easy and greater access to agricultural inputs and government policies. Farmers have to be introduced to additional information regarding soil preparation, weed and pest control, climatic conditions, how to arrange and care for tractors and other implements, how to arrange for seed, pesticides and bags for harvesting and how to go about borrowing money and paying back loans etc. If these are carefully implemented, they will lead to the rapid development of the rural area in the country.

Multimedia centre is a powerful concept to bring the latest technologies to remote communities traditionally neglected by information services providers. Multimedia centres contributed to an equitable expansion of the telecommunications network and offered rural communities the chance to adopt information and communications technologies to their benefit, strengthening social ties within the community and economic ties with the outside world (Achimugu, Oluwagbemi, Oluwaranti, & Afolabi, 2009) . Governments, development institutions, non-profit organizations and entrepreneurs operate them, in different forms to accommodate local conditions and opportunities. Multimedia centres have brought a visible and identifiable change in the skills and capacities of people and institutions in communities Fuchs (2000).

There is a growing recognition that library services, particularly in public libraries, are an integral part of national socioeconomic development and improvement of the general quality of life (Al-Shboul & Abrizah, 2014) . Public libraries in Africa like their counterparts in other developing economies have played a role in building social capital in their communities by providing a public space where citizens can gather and work on personal and community problems. They provide a wide range of innovative and creative programs that



bring citizens together and break down the barriers of age, ethnicity, culture, socio-economic status, language and geography (Kranich 2001). According to Abu, Grace and Carroll (2021), public library has the responsibility of equipping members of her community with equal opportunity of access to information that will develop both their personal skills and civic skills. Skilful members of a rural community are expected to ultimately contribute to the development of the community.

Public libraries in Nigeria are part of the government, in terms of administration and budget procedures. The establishment and activities of public libraries in Nigeria, however, has been mostly limited to urban areas. This has resulted in illiteracy and ignorance among young people in rural areas (Ebiwolate, 2010). Satisfaction of the contextual information needs involves unique information services which could be in the form of telephone, recreational, advisory services, extension/outreach, socio-political, current awareness, children advisory services, selective dissemination of information, book mobile and referral services

The development of the internet, had greatly extended the range of activities that could be undertaken by multimedia centres. In Nigeria, there is a continuous improvement in Internet penetration to rural areas. According to a Global System for Mobile Communication (GSMA) survey, the rural-urban divide in mobile internet use in Nigeria has narrowed steadily, from 53% in 2018 to 39% in 2020 (Mba, 2020). Internet availability coupled with reduction in the cost solar panels for rural electrification is a great impetus for setting up of an information space. It is now the most common type of centre, and examples can be found in South Africa, Botswana, and the Asia-Pacific region, as well as in more developed European and North American countries (Ndinde, 2014) . The primary aim was to provide opportunities for the community to use ICT for a wide range of purposes, not just as

a means of acquiring, processing and storing information. The centres were often built around training in the use of the internet, computers and associated technologies.

### Integrated Information Space Model

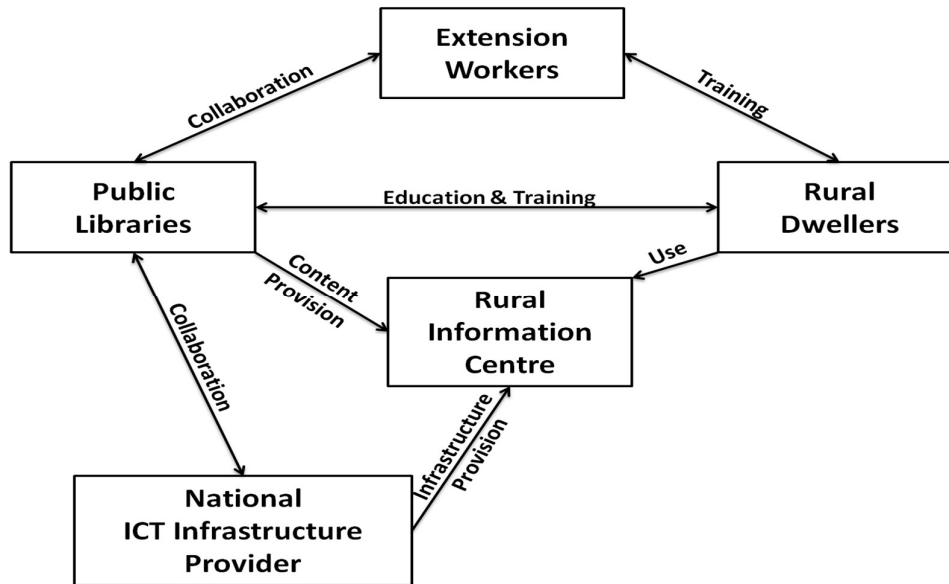


Figure 1: Information Space Models

Source: Model designed by authors

The drivers of the processes of the model in Figure 1 are librarians in public libraries. They collaborate with national Information and Communication Technology infrastructures provider to deploy the right ICT facilities to the rural areas. Such infrastructures include ones that will enable the rural dwellers to have access to the Internet and use mobile phones. Librarians in public libraries also collaborate with extension workers to make sure rural dwellers are not only informed about how to increase production, but also on how to effectively use information resources in the rural communities to market their products and services. These collaborators are, like the librarians, working with government agencies;

hence it makes it easier for the national government to key into the rural information infrastructure project.

Another major role of librarians in public libraries is development of the content of the information centre. The content includes the various personal information needs of the rural dwellers such as health, social and reproductive information needs. Information on how they can improve the outputs of their products and best marketing strategies are also part of the content.

## **Conclusion**

Multimedia centres which are equipped with radio, television and computers connected to the internet are desirable for Nigerian rural communities. This will not only increase the contribution of the rural dwellers to national economy, create more jobs but will discourage migration from rural to urban areas.

Public libraries have the responsibility of reaching out to governmental organisations such as the Nigerian Communications Commission who are in charge of building national information technology infrastructure to extend information and communications technology infrastructures to rural areas. Developing infrastructures is expensive and requires heavy funding, which cannot be borne by individuals in rural communities. The problem relates not only to the costs themselves but also to financial sustainability of the infrastructures. Except in special cases, therefore, the local or national government must be involved in the construction of the projects with a notion that IT should be a universal service to all inhabitants of the country, a public-goods concept. Librarians in public libraries can put up proposals for international donors to co-finance the projects to bridge the funding gap.

Another important role of public library is training of the rural dwellers on the use of the multimedia centre. They need to know the usefulness of the resources provided at the

centre and how beneficial the centre is to them. Poverty and lack of awareness of the modern farming techniques characterize the life style of people in the rural areas, majority of them are peasant farmers using some primitive tools which invariably yield low quantity of their agricultural products during harvest. As a result of these general problems of people in the rural areas, there is need for information experts to organize some training programmes for the set of rural dwellers so as to enhance their rural development and boost their living standard.

Since most of the farmers cannot not read or write, the trainer (information expert) have to devise a training programme in which information regarding the basic principles of farming are conveyed to them in story form using their local languages, with the aid of metaphors they could identify with, while necessary demonstrations and role-playing are to be incorporated into the programme. Librarians are to make sure that the languages of communication on the electronic devices, including computers, have local languages. Today, there are computer software that display information on computers in the three major Nigerian languages.

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